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COLOMBIA'S STRUGGLE

October 6, 2003



Colombian President Alvaro Uribe discusses his efforts to control narcotics trafficking and growing incidents of rebel attacks on civilians.

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RAY SUAREZ: Last week, in New York and Washington, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe had something to brag about: he says his country is finally winning the war on drug production.

The South American country has long exported almost all the cocaine and much of the heroin bought in the US, but this year's crops are down substantially, according to both the U.N. and the US government. Uribe has shared the credit with Washington. The US has given Bogota \$2.5 billion in aid, much of it military, since the year 2000. I spoke to President Uribe last week.

Colombia's efforts to thwart drug trafficking

RAY SUAREZ: A lot of Americans probably don't realize that Colombia is one of the largest recipients in the world of American aid. What can you tell the people of this country about how it's being spent?



PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE: Colombia is destroying drugs. In one year of my administration, we have destroyed 70 percent of illegal drugs. Our determination is to overcome this problem. We

want no longer drugs in Colombia but we need the American help with budget, with technology and with the attitude of the American citizens. Whenever one American citizen consumes coca, cocaine or poppy, this consumption helps the traffickers, helps the

There are some things on which we cannot compromise. The key drug lords cannot escape going to prison for long terms by paying cash to their victims. The government of this country must be aware of the fact that their credit is at stake.

REP. TOM LANTOS
D-California

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terrorists.

RAY SUAREZ: "Terrorists" is Uribe's general reference to two opposing forces. More than 20,000 leftist guerillas in Colombia - the main group is known by the Spanish acronym, FARC - and more than 15,000 armed right wing paramilitaries; they're involved in a complex brutal war that takes ten lives a day, mostly civilians. Both the FARC and to an even greater degree the paramilitary groups are said to be funded by the drug traders, and Uribe considers both groups a single enemy.

PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE: We have the challenge from terrorist groups against our people, against our democracy. There is a connection. Colombia has terrorists because Colombia has drugs. In the absence of drugs, we can defeat terrorists easily.

RAY SUAREZ: Now 51 years old, Alvaro Uribe comes from a family of wealthy landowners. He trained as a lawyer at Harvard and Oxford, then spent much of his career as an official in local and national government. Uribe won the presidency last year which a landslide and his approval ratings have remained in the 60s and 70s. Since taking office, Uribe rejected his predecessor's strategy of making concessions to the rebels and has taken a hard line even as editorial and other critics have denounced it as a "take no prisoners" approach.

Uribe's government has sent the army into FARC strongholds and made arrests; it's increased taxes in order to recruit more soldiers, and it's begun to reward civilian informants who identify guerrilla rebels in their midst. The US has sent military trainers and Special Forces to join the effort. In the Clinton years, American aid was only to be used against drugs, not fighting rebels. Last year the Bush administration and Congress erased the distinction and stepped directly into the war with hardware, training and troops. Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Uribe's efforts.



COLIN POWELL: I was impressed as he catalogued for the world, for the international community, all the

successes that Colombia has had in the past year in reducing violence and destroying illicit crops throughout the country. And I was also impressed in his speech by his clear commitment to human rights in the prosecution of this war that he is fighting against terrorists and drug lords in Colombia.

Uribe's plea for more funding

RAY SUAREZ: At the White House and elsewhere this week, Uribe asked for continued US aid currently set to expire in 2005. But Uribe says he needs ongoing help to "kill the snake."

PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE: We have to insist, to persevere, because the snake is debilitated, is weakened, but the snake is still alive. My generation hasn't had a single day of peace. What I want for the new generation of Colombians is that they can live in a country happy, without the difficulties my generation has faced for all my life.

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PRESIDENT
ALVARO URIBE

RAY SUAREZ: Was your own father killed in the violence?



PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE: Yes. As million of Colombians.

RAY SUAREZ: Despite Uribe's campaign, the rebels remain active on several fronts. One is the practice of

kidnapping. The FARC has taken scores of government officials and foreign nationals hostage, demanding money and prisoner exchanges. In August, a Colombian TV network aired footage of these hostages, urging Uribe to cut a deal with the FARC rebels.

GLORIA POLANCO, Kidnapped Congresswoman (Translated): We are helpless here in the jungle. We are in the hands of god, the Virgin Mary and Mr. President to take pity on us and get us out of this captivity.

ALAN JARA, Former Meta Governor (Translated): A humanitarian agreement is never a concession to the enemy, never a sign of weakness. President Uribe, a humanitarian agreement is a concession only to our families and to life. It is a sign of greatness.

Obstacles facing Uribe

RAY SUAREZ: But Uribe refuses to negotiate with the rebels and the hostages remain in captivity. The FARC also says it's captured three American civilians, the contractors were on a reconnaissance mission in February when their plane went down in rebel territory. The insurgents are also known for mass killings and bombings in civilian areas. The FARC began in the 1960s with Marxist leanings, but independent analysts say their aim now is simply to make the country ungovernable.



Fast growing paramilitary militias mostly operate in rural areas. Like the leftist FARC, the right-wing paramilitaries are considered a terrorist group by the US State Department, but the Uribe administration has

made some controversial overtures to them. The two sides declared a cease-fire in July, and Uribe has proposed a bill to give paramilitaries amnesty: Reduced jail terms in exchange for reparation payments to victims' families. Critics of the plan include US Congressman Tom Lantos. The California Democrat says amnesty would let human rights violators with drug ties off the hook.

REP. TOM LANTOS: There are some things on which we cannot compromise. The key drug lords cannot escape going to prison for long terms by paying cash to their victims. The government of this country must be aware of the fact that their credibility is at stake.

RAY SUAREZ: Uribe says amnesty will bring Colombia closer to what he calls "definitive peace." And he said paramilitary fighters do not receive special treatment in his government.

PRESIDENT ALVARO

URIBE: Guerrillas and people from paramilitary groups, and they both are terrorist groups. Their actions are pure... are sheer terrorist. In the past when the army was not effective against guerrillas, many people in Colombia thought



the army was in collusion with guerrillas; there are - there have been isolated cases, isolated cases of collusion with paramilitaries. But my government needs transparency.

RAY SUAREZ: That transparency, says Uribe, will lead to justice for all offenders. Uribe's alleged paramilitary links are also documented in an unauthorized biography by Newsweek's Joseph Contreras. Written in Spanish, the book says Uribe, as a provincial official in the 1990s, presided over civilian massacres by paramilitaries. And the book reports Uribe once had direct ties to the late drug lord Pablo Escobar. Many bookstores have reportedly received threatening calls not to sell the Contreras book.

RAY SUAREZ: Are some of the things that he's written about past associations, when you were in government as a younger man, is there any truth to them?

PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE: Ah, please, please, this is not a time of my campaign. Please. I... I cannot devote time to discuss gossips, to discuss adventures of journalists. I have to work seriously to overcome the problems of my country. Now when you have the possibility to destroy drugs in Colombia, you cannot leave the war halfway, you have to fulfill the aim... and a guarantee for the American people that we will fulfill the aim is our determination.

RAY SUAREZ: Mr. President, thanks for your time.

PRESIDENT ALVARO URIBE: Thank you.



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